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SOME FRENCH CANADIAN FICTION

BY ERNEST BOYD

IN the spring of last year Daniel Halévy, the friend of Charles Péguy and collaborator in the now famous *Cahiers de la quinzaine*, aroused the interest of all the friends of that amazing adventure in periodical literature by launching a series of *Cahiers verts*, in which the main idea of Péguy's editorship was preserved. Each issue of the series is a complete work by one author, but M. Halévy has adopted the conventional format of the French novel, and is obviously editing a series of books, not a periodical of which every number is a book, as Péguy did. The first work selected by the editor showed that, while thus modifying Péguy's plan, he had retained the tradition of befriending newcomers and of breaking new ground. It was a volume entitled *Maria Chapdelaine: Récit du Canada français*, and the author was Louis Hémon, a name unknown to the vast majority of the reading public in France. This simple and charming story of French Canadian farm life had an irresistible appeal in France, where the literature of rural manners lacks the sense of wildness, of great open spaces and of untamed nature, which informs the narrative of Louis Hémon.

The French peasant, whether revealed in the harsh light of a Maupassant and a Zola, or in the more sober colors of a George Sand or a Gaston Chérau, is exceedingly remote from those exiled pioneers in Quebec and Ontario whose link with France is little more than a memory of ancestors who started on a great adventure only to be forever parted from their mother country. In *Maria Chapdelaine* these authentic Canadians, who refuse that title to any other race in Canada, evoke memories long dormant in France, and the tale of their struggle for existence against storm and snow, of their stand for race and tradition against the overwhelming forces of another dispensation, opens up a new perspective in French literature. The descriptions of nature, the faithful notation of the round of tasks, the joys and sorrows, which

make up life in those distant regions, gain an added savor from the idiom of this Canadian French, where sonorous archaisms and barbarous Anglicisms jostle one another in the happiest innocence. It is not surprising that this unpretentious story of a farmer's daughter, who loses an unspoken love through the death of a young guide in a snowstorm, and is then married to the farmer of her parents' choice, should have aroused the enthusiasm of French critics. Here was something as different from the incredible "Far West" of French literary convention as from the studies of rural life to which the public had been accustomed in a country whose agricultural population is probably the most settled, comfortable and unadventurous in Western Europe. This lonely community of almost forgotten French men and women, speaking a tongue akin to that of Ronsard and Montaigne when it is not perilously like the French of Stratford-atte-Bowe, came as a revelation through the fine work of Louis Hémon, just as the Irish of Synge's plays brought a breath of Elizabethan English and the play of elemental human beings into our own modern literature.

The history of French Canadian and Anglo-Irish literature suggests some interesting parallels. In both cases there is the effort of a racial minority to preserve its national identity. In French Canada the substitution of English for the native language has not succeeded as in Ireland, and the situation is somewhat similar to that of two centuries ago, when Irish was still the medium of literary expression. In Ireland there has been a twofold renaissance, for not only is there a growing literature in Irish but the Anglo-Irish writers, under the Gaelic influence, have so moulded the language imposed by the conquest that it has become an adequate instrument of national self-expression. Anglo-Irish literature is now known as a distinctive manifestation of the Irish spirit, and quite unlike the Anglicized literature by provincial Irishmen which could never be more than a feeble echo.

The literature of French Canada, like that of Ireland, has been largely thrown back upon past history for its material. It was only after the advent of Standish O'Grady and W. B. Yeats and the group associated with the Irish literary renaissance that attention was diverted from old sorrows and hatreds to a broader and

deeper conception of nationality. For the past quarter of a century and more Anglo-Irish literature has been concerned with the legends and traditions of the race rather than with the political struggles which succeeded the classic age of Irish culture. In Canada a similar change was initiated by Philippe Aubert de Gaspé in 1863, when he published *Les Anciens Canadiens*. This epic of Canadian French history surprised its critics by its absence of rancor. The Abbé Camille Roy, an authoritative historian of Canadian French literature, reproaches him with being too ready to approve of "national resignation" in the face of Britain's victory. That is just the sort of criticism which was brought against the pioneers of the revival in Ireland, but literary jingoism has had to submit to the facts, which have justified the innovators by bringing to them and their country the world-fame denied to the purely patriotic writers who preceded them. Similarly, Gaspé's work attained extraordinary popularity and is one of the few Canadian French works which have been translated.

Maria Chapdelaine is typical of the literature of French Canada, which has been chiefly concerned with rural conditions, as is the case with Irish literature. The Canadians have to face the same problem as their Irish contemporaries. It is not in the half Anglicized drawing-rooms of Montreal and Quebec that the native spirit thrives, but in the smaller communities and scattered farms, outside the reach of urban influences. While the drama, such as it is, in the absence of a folk-theatre is almost entirely restricted to historical subjects, the novel concentrates on the life and manners of the countryside. The lack of good novelists has been the striking anomaly of Anglo-Irish literature until the strange genius of James Joyce began to realize itself in his powerful studies of the middle-class. The Irish have the gift of story-telling, the art of the Shanachie persists, but the novel is neglected, or practised as a pot-boiler.

The French Canadian novelists have been relatively more numerous, but they have had nothing to show comparable to *Maria Chapdelaine*. Apart from the emulators of Gaspé, of whom Laure Conan is the most important, the majority have studied the rural civilization of the old *habitants* and their successors. The first novel of importance was *Charles Guérin*, which

had a considerable vogue in the late 'forties, but the author, P. J. O. Chauveau, was not familiar with the manners of the Canadians except as they revealed themselves in the half French, half English society of the large cities. Its success was mainly due to the fact that he wrote with more care for style than was usual at that period—or since! The typical fiction of French Canada dates rather from Gérin-Lajoie's *Jean Rivard*, which appeared some twenty years later. At last there came a novelist who attempted to write the epic of colonization, the struggle of man against Nature on the virgin soil of a new country. There is a peculiar, naïve charm to this novel, through which the practical wisdom of the agriculturalist pierces, even to the extent of notes of interest to farmers! Since then others have developed the theme with less obviously utilitarian intention. The hardships and adventures of the pioneers and backwoodsmen, the great life of the prairies and forests—these are the eternal subjects of the Canadian novelists.

Despite the occasional fine work of such men as Dr. Choquette in *Les Ribaud* and *Claude Paysan*, during recent years, and the historical tales of Laure Conan, dealing with the period of the Anglo-French war, the average novel continues to trace the more or less external aspects of the rural communities, without any achievement worthy of note. Just before the war a new writer, Hector Bernier, came forward with what promised to be a welcome innovation, *Au large de l'écueil* and *Ce que disait la flamme*, two novels of contemporary middle-class society. Unfortunately, bad writing and an excess of that religiosity with which these transplanted French endeavor to compensate for the delinquencies of the original stock in matters of faith, seriously invalidate their claim to serious attention. *Ce que disait la flamme*, however, has this interest that it sets forth the problem with which the Irish writers have had to contend, the problem of what is known in Ireland as "West Britonism"; that is, the affectation of the pseudo-English, who hold that what is native is vulgar and inferior.

The flowering of poetry in Ireland has its counterpart in French Canada, where Louis Fréchette, who died in 1908, long held the seat of honor as one of the greatest poets in French literature out-

side France. His *Fleurs boréales* was crowned by the French Academy, and contains some beautiful poems. Fréchette's work, like that of his rival, W. Chapman, is full of a passionate sense of nationality, and in their songs, as in those of the Irish, is heard the plaint of a conquered but undefeated people. The atmosphere of the North, the crisp snows and the mighty forests, are as integral a part of their poetic landscape as the mist and bogland of the Irish poets, and these bring an unaccustomed note into French poetry, so highly civilized and sophisticated and polished. Here is Nature as she is seen in the wilds, with a fiercer beauty than the mellow, formal charm of the eighteenth century landscape gardening which seems to be the background of so much French poetry.

In the early enthusiasm over *Maria Chapdelaine* there was a salute to the first really fine piece of prose to come out of French Canada. The author was unknown, but in time it was discovered that, though the story came from Canada, Louis Hémon was not a French Canadian. He was a Breton who had gone off to Canada and had written his book out of his first-hand experiences on the farms. His sister describes him as a silent man who "fled from the world and loved solitude and meditation", and this trait, together with the evidence of his book, indicate in him a certain resemblance to J. M. Synge. Like the latter in the Aran Islands, Louis Hémon in Canada learned how to observe and listen, and thus his notation of the Canadian French idiom is wonderfully effective, for he knows just how far it can be used and how it can give a color and tang to the speech of the people, and he does not allow unconscious barbarisms to spoil his writing, as do so many of the Canadian French authors. He has done for the speech of French Canada what Synge did for the Irish; he has brought it into literature.

After he had despatched the manuscript of *Maria Chapdelaine* to France, the author started off to tramp across country from St. John's Lake where the book was written. His plan was to follow on foot the route of the Canadian Pacific Railway. At a curve in the line neither he nor his companion heard the approaching train and both were run over and killed. When the letter accepting his story was returned to Paris, marked "dead", there was nobody to whom it could be sent, nor any known source from which informa-

tion could be obtained concerning the mysterious author. So the story was published in a newspaper, where the father of Louis Hémon first learned of its existence. He wrote to explain the relationship and thus the facts were obtained concerning this supposedly Canadian French novelist. In Canada, however, the loss of this promising writer, at the age of thirty-three, has been mourned as a loss to the literature of French Canada. A white marble monument has been erected on the spot where he was killed, and in 1919 a commemorative stone was placed at Péribonka, near St. John's Lake, on the farm where he wrote *Maria Chapdelaine*. The Geographical Society of Quebec has re-named two lakes, Lake Hémon and Lake Chapdelaine, in honor of the author who has given French Canadian literature its first novel to transcend the limits of what has hitherto been a mere by-path of modern letters.

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